

The future strategic direction of NATO

Authors

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There was nothing preordained that determined NATO would still exist over 70 years since it was created. In that time, it has grown from a founding membership of 12, to 30 in 2020 with the arrival of North Macedonia. Its purposes were clearly defined – deterring Soviet expansionism, forbidding the revival of nationalist militarism in Europe through a strong US presence on the continent, and encouraging European political integration. Growing worries about Soviet intentions, culminating in the detonation of a Soviet atomic bomb in 1949, followed by the Korean War, soon led to a consolidated command structure with a military HQ. The UK provided the first NATO Secretary General, Lord Ismay.

Over time, NATO has responded to changing political circumstances, through détente, with the adoption of a flexible posture offering military responses short of a nuclear exchange in the 1960s; the suspension of détente after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the deployment of SS20 weapons in Europe; and the collapse of the Soviet Union and a united Germany at the heart of Europe. The Yugoslav conflict – and others in the Caucuses and elsewhere – demonstrated the dangerous instability of a post-Cold War world to which NATO responded through, among other actions, the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. By the end of the 20th century, NATO was welcoming three partners as full members – Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

NATO's Strategic Concept adopted in 1999 referenced “complex new risks to Euro-Atlantic Peace and Security ... And the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction”. These risks became real with the unfolding horror of 9/11 and the invocation for the only time of Article 5 in support of the US. The definition of security had expanded in a new century to include freedom from the violent extremism bred by instability and nation failure. NATO has made clear that only the widest possible coalition can deal with the three elements – military might, diplomacy and post-conflict stabilisation – and has reached out across the Mediterranean, Gulf and Pacific to develop security partnerships and work with other organisations that have mandates in institution building, governance development and judicial reform.

As NATO reflects on new and growing threats, it must continue to develop its strategic direction to tackle them, building on its expertise and experience to do so. As senior

politicians with a direct knowledge of NATO, we offer our thoughts on what, and how, NATO should address for the future.

1. Affirmation of underlying principles

The principles of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law on which the Alliance was built are indivisible from the commitment to collective security expressed in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. We are deeply concerned that the policies of a number of NATO governments are moving away from these fundamental values. If this is allowed to continue without consequences, it will weaken the solidarity between Allies. NATO leaders should hold a frank debate on this issue at their next meeting and should be willing to consider suspension of a member state as an ultimate step.

2. Partnership for Peace upgraded

The original concept was to enable nations outside NATO to develop an individual relationship, choosing their own priorities and the level and pace of progress. 14 of the countries who chose to engage have subsequently joined NATO, and a further 20 nations are currently involved in PfP, from Central Asia, the Balkans, EU member states, the Caucasus and Russia. While the emphasis has, for good reasons, been on the neighbourhood of Europe primarily to the East, it is time to review and upgrade the PfP model. NATO members need to consider where common threats across the world can be more effectively mitigated by partnerships, especially in countries that are grappling with other problems. In particular we would suggest NATO consider East Africa, the Pacific Rim and the Mediterranean Littoral. In some areas it will not be easy, not least because the underlying principles must remain at the forefront of all activities. However, on the basis that engagement can help support change all need to be considered carefully.

Upgrading the model is specifically to take account of the twin realities that our world is shrinking and our neighbourhood expanding – threats are growing and come from anywhere. Reviewing the breadth and depth of PfP could therefore be a vital component for the future.

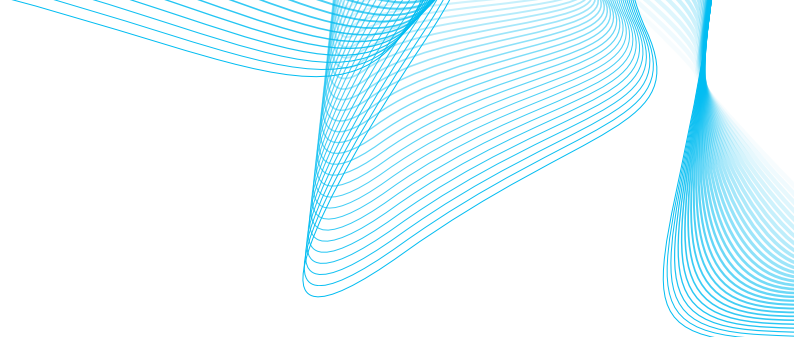


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3. China

China’s military spending has increased this year by 6.6 per cent. It is clear President Xi Jinping remains committed to the modernisation of the People’s Liberation Army by 2035 and its transformation into a “world-class” military by 2049. Recent events demonstrate the determination China has to bring Hong Kong under its firm grip, raising grave concerns for its future as well as that of Taiwan. China’s argument with India, and ongoing disputes with Japan, demonstrate preparedness to press territorial claims from the Himalayas to the South China Seas. In addition, China is increasing its activity in the Arctic, creating a “polar silk road” and a “5+1” group with Nordic nations, similar to the 17+1 group that guides China’s cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries.

In December 2019 NATO leaders said: “We recognise that China’s growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to



address together as an Alliance.” NATO needs to develop a coherent policy towards China that includes conflict avoidance and de-escalation.

4. Russia

The NATO-Russia Council (NRC) is 18 years old, established under the declaration “NATO-Russia relations: A New Quality”. Times change, and the invasion of Ukraine led to the suspension of all practical cooperation, though the NRC remains active at ambassadorial level in keeping communication open. We believe the NRC should continue. At the same time, NATO should ensure it is resourced to make decisions on countering Russian aggression in the form of cyber attacks, biological weapons and disinformation campaigns – all of which have been used directly on member states in recent times. Smart, speedy, collective action and deterrence should be deployed against clear, unarguable evidence of activities detrimental to the democratic functioning and freedoms of NATO members or partners as a priority.



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5. Nuclear sharing

Secretary General Stoltenberg said recently:

The purpose of NATO’s nuclear weapons is not to provoke a conflict, but to preserve peace, deter aggression and prevent coercion. NATO seeks a world without nuclear weapons, sadly these conditions do not exist today. A world where Russia, China and others have nuclear weapons, but NATO has none, is simply not a safer world. That is why all NATO countries have agreed that as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance. To preserve peace and our freedom.

As the Alliance considers its future strategic direction, it should do so with the confidence to ensure the burden-sharing of nuclear capability. Nuclear sharing – allowing common decisions on nuclear weapons policy, maintaining technical equipment and storage of weapons – are all important to delivering a coherent policy and form part of the collaboration of NATO member countries.

6. Economies of scale and procurement policies

One of the lasting effects of Covid-19 will be its economic impact. Even a V-shaped recovery will take time, and defence/security spending will be affected, either through its share of direct cuts, or in percentage terms if linked to economic performance. Whatever the reason, NATO may see less spent on defence in the next few years. This argues for a push on economies of scale, sensible procurement and greater collaboration.

This does not mean that members should move away from the commitments made at the Wales Summit in 2014 to spending no less than 2 per cent of national GDP on defence. All members pledged to move towards 2 per cent by 2024. At the time, only three countries met the target; nine now do. NATO should continue to push for the pledge to be fulfilled. The US, whose expenditure was roughly 3.4 per cent last year has pressed for Europe to bear more of the burden of defence through successive presidents. “We cannot continue to pay for the military protection of Europe while NATO States

are not paying their fair share and living off the fat of the land,” said President Kennedy in 1963.

The relationship with the EU is a powerful one. In December 2016, NATO and the EU jointly endorsed over 40 proposals to strengthen NATO-EU cooperation in seven areas: countering hybrid threats, operations, cyber defence, defence capabilities, supporting the defence industry, exercises, and training and capacity building for partners.

These proposals should continue to form the backdrop of cooperation. The underlying political issues concerning Cyprus, the EU and Turkey are not resolved, and NATO must continue to find smart ways of ensuring they do not impinge on vital cooperation. These have been effectively done between NATO and the EU and should continue. Collaboration should ensure sensible decisions on where EU defence spending and activity can complement that of NATO.

Economies of scale remain a problem within Europe. Differing specifications of the same hardware prevent opportunities for bulk purchase, which, combined with failures to marry operational needs, adds to costs. The European Defence Agency (EDA) is a partner organisation able to work with EU nations on research and development of significant benefit to NATO. Examples of this have been R&D on improvised explosive devices, helicopter training for Afghanistan missions and mid-air refuelling training and equipment. More needs to be done with EDA and others to ensure that programmes to the benefit of the EU also benefit NATO.

Given that Covid-19 will put increased pressure on defence equipment budgets across the Alliance, it is all the more important that these are spent in ways that increase NATO’s overall capability, avoiding duplication and filling gaps wherever possible. Prerequisites for this are a competitive defence industry operating with the minimum of barriers between allied countries, and a resilient supply chain avoiding dependence for critical technologies on potential adversaries. NATO should play a revitalised role as the forum where Allies coordinate their procurement programmes, drawing on the latest threat assessments in all domains – land, sea, air, space and cyber space.




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7. Information and disinformation

NATO has a role in promoting national resilience among its members. The collective is, after all, only as good as its constituent parts. Disinformation campaigns are designed to undermine and dislodge support for organisations. They are increasingly effective and being used against individuals, organisations and ideas. It is astonishing that vaccination, once heralded as the greatest weapon against childhood disease and death, is now part of a major conspiracy theory threatening the health of millions. Complacency is not an option.

Undermining NATO and its members needs to be combatted, with investment in two specific ways. First, investment in directly rebutting conspiracies, accusations and stories. Rebuttal units in political parties became the norm in the UK 30 years ago. They are required by any major organisation whose credibility and room to act is potentially under threat from disinformation. Second, investment in explaining what NATO is and



what it does. Polling conducted by the Policy Institute at King's College London and Ipsos MORI last year showed that across 12 NATO countries 43 per cent of the public had a favourable view of the organisation. Favourability was higher in Eastern European countries, such as Poland with 60 per cent, but hovered around 30 to 35 per cent in Germany, France Italy and Spain. Younger people knew less about NATO than older people, which for a variety of reasons is perhaps not surprising. Interestingly in the UK, the age divide was particularly stark – while 41 per cent of over-50s knew something of NATO, only 25 per cent of under-35s had some idea of what it was.

As NATO reviews its future, it should ensure that communicating its ambitions is part of the plan. It should require all member states to invest in direct information campaigns and education, so the importance of NATO and its role are better understood. It will be a good investment as future generations make decisions on the role and funding of multilateral organisations.



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8. What of the UK?

Whatever political perspective the authors of this short paper might have, we are united in the belief that the UK must remain an outward-facing, engaged nation. We believe that defence and security remain at the forefront of the purpose of government, and that a collective approach with like-minded allies is key to tackling the growing, diverse threats our democracies and freedoms face. We would argue that it is essential that NATO deepens its relationship with its members, broadens its engagement and strengthens its capacity to act.

At a time of growing challenges to multilateral action, it is vital that NATO steps up to demonstrate its enduring importance in a more uncertain world. It should do so now.

We want the UK to play a central and leading role in the strategic direction of NATO, in full collaboration with other members. “Global Britain” should have at its core a determination that collective action on defence and security is where the country will make a major contribution. We anticipate the UK taking the lead where its expertise and experience can drive ideas, develop new thinking and promote action. Our experience and commitment to NATO speaks for itself in the past, but it is with renewed determination that we should engage across all the issues for the future.



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